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ABSTRACT

To help teachers stay abreast of changes in language usage, this update presents 100 alphabetically arranged short answers to questions often asked by teachers, parents, and students. The guide takes a "style" approach to usage, providing answers that draw attention to the language choices and flexibilities available in particular situations. For example, when asked about the difference between the terms "among" or "between," the traditional rule is cited (use "between" when referring to two things and "among" when referring to three or more items), followed by a comment noting that the rule is not always helpful, since both words are used without confusion by speakers and writers, often in contradiction to this rule. (JD)

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Usage Update. P.E.N. (Primary English Notes) 16

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P.E.N. PRIMARY ENGLISH NOTES . . .
Classroom Notes . . . from the Primary English Teaching Association

USAGE UPDATE

Update. In conditions of rapid language change, there is always a need to update one's grasp of those 'formalities and technicalities' of expression which are loosely termed USAGE.

Here are 100 short answers to usage questions that teachers, parents or students often ask. Wherever possible, the answers draw attention to the existence of more language choices and flexibilities than most people are likely to be aware of.

This might be called a style approach to usage, in contrast to the old 'correctness tradition' which held that there was only right or wrong, black or white, one way of talking and writing in all situations, regardless of audience, subject or occasion. (See 'Notes', at end.)

a or an? In choosing which of these to use in writing, be guided by what you normally *say*. In general, *a* is used before consonants (except silent *h*: *an heir, an honour*), and *an* before vowels (except those with a *y* or *w* sound: *a union, a once-famous name*). But some uses of *an* before *h* are in dispute, e.g. before *habitual, hallucination, heroic, historical, hotel, hypothesis, hysterical*; if you speak these words with less than the full sound of *h* as in *hope*, you will probably prefer to use *an* in front of them. Either *a* or *an* is acceptable.

abbreviation or contraction? The difference is important. An abbreviation omits letters including the last; a contraction also omits letters but retains the last. Commonly a full-stop is used after an abbreviation but not after a contraction.
abbreviations: col. Tas. pic. Nov. p. ed. Mon.
contractions: Ave Mr Pty parlt Rd Ltd govt
Some newspapers are now also omitting the stop after abbreviations, esp. after familiar caps, e.g. NSW ACTU

active or passive? The active voice, which makes the doer the subject of the sentence, is the more common order in English sentences, and is usually to be preferred as the briefer, more direct form ...
active: A rocket struck the bow of the ship.
passive: The bow of the ship was struck by a rocket.
But passives are sometimes useful or necessary, e.g.
'Joe has been choked by fumes.'(emphasises person-acted-on)
'Heat was applied to the mixture.'(a common form in science)
'New houses are being built.' (the doer is unimportant)

ad? Like *flu, taxi* or *exam, ad* has become a word in its own right, not an abbreviation, and so does not need a full-stop. At the more formal levels of writing it usually yields to *advertisement*. See also SIMPLER WORDS?

affect or effect? They are often confused. *Affect*, in most of its uses, is a verb meaning 'influence' (also 'pretend'), e.g. 'Music affects me in strange ways'. The chief use of *effect* is as a noun meaning 'result', e.g. 'Music has a strange effect on me'. Less commonly, *effect* is used as a verb meaning 'bring about' or 'cause', e.g. 'The vet has effected a complete cure'.

ain't? The schools have campaigned so bitterly against this contraction that no one dare use it in any context, except facetiously. Fair enough to condemn *ain't* as an unjustified substitute for *isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't*, but the campaign insensitively killed innocent *ain't I?*, a justifiable contraction of *am not I?* The ways of usage can be strange! Sooner than risk (ignorant) censure by saying *ain't I?*, people everywhere now use the illogical *aren't I?* (are not I?).

all right or alright? The texts which for so long have said, *'All right* is right, but *alright* is all wrong', have, however, failed to make *alright* a non-word. It appears widely in advertising. It makes more sense than *all right* in exclamations like 'That's alright!' And most people go on nonchalantly using it, probably because it is a similar formation to *almost, already, although, altogether, always*. In situations like this, teachers need an historical approach: 'Use of *alright* is plainly increasing, but many people have been taught that it is wrong and that *all right* is correct. In fact, *alright* is neither morally nor linguistically wrong. Usage seems likely to make it wholly respectable in a decade or so. Use whichever you please; but be aware that some people will criticise you if you use *alright.'*

although or though? They are equally acceptable and are interchangeable.

among or amongst? *Among* is the common form. Some people feel *amongst* is old-fashioned; but it is often found before words beginning with a vowel and as a sentence opener – it is by no means dead. So use whichever sounds agreeable.

among or between? An old rule says, 'Use *between* of two things, *among* of three or more', but Sir Ernest Gowers calls this 'superstition'. To insist on the rule is unhelpful: both words are used without confusion by speakers and writers, often in contradiction of the rule, e.g. '... my mind will, I fear, always waver between dislike, exasperation, boredom, and admiration' (T.S. Eliot).

and/but as sentence-openers? Still heard in some schools is the dogma, 'You must not start a sentence with *and* or *but*'. But English writers have been using these simple connectives in that way for a thousand years and continue to do so. Of course their use should not be overdone.

apostrophes? Too much fuss is made of the 'difficulty' of getting apostrophes right in the possessive forms of nouns (and some indefinite pronouns). This simple 3-step rule works for both singulars and plurals:

(1) write the name of the owner/owners
(2) then add an apostrophe
(3) only add an *s* if it sounds right.

Fifteen minutes practice with this rule should clinch the matter for evermore – and clarify such allegedly difficult instances as, *one sheep's tail, two sheep's tails; a man's voice, two men's voices; John Keats' poems* or *John Keats's poems*. In the last instance, both forms are correct because we may say (and therefore write) them either way.

around or round? Efforts to keep a clear distinction between *around* and *round* have not succeeded. The words are increasingly used interchangeably, even in formal writing.

as to? This phrase can be useful at the beginning of a sentence: '*As to* the moral problem, my opinion ...' But it usually sounds stilted within a sentence and can be omitted without loss or can give way to *on* or *about*: 'My opinion *on* the moral problem ...' The not uncommon phrase, *as to whether*, can usually be cut with profit to *whether*.

between or among? See AMONG OR BETWEEN?

between you and I? This phrase is as common in spoken English in Australia as it is in England and the United States. While some usage authorities are disposed to accept it in speech, there is general agreement that '*between you and me*' should be used in writing.

Bible? When this word refers to the Christian Scriptures, convention accords it special status: it need not be enclosed in inverted commas nor italicised but can simply be written with a capital.

bi–? This prefix means *two*, e.g. *bicentenary* refers to a two-hundredth anniversary. But carelessness has confused some uses of the prefix so that it is safer to say 'every two weeks' or 'fortnightly' rather than *biweekly*, 'every two months' than *bimonthly*, 'every two years' than *biennially*.

but at end of sentence? Surely teachers must unite against it! For example, in 'I won't do it but', *but* is either redundant or an unwarranted substitute for *though* or *however*.

but or however? The *AGPS Style Manual*[1] in discussing sentence linkage says that *but* is nearly always preferable to *however*, having more force and point and being less likely to be misused. The opinion is valuable though perhaps too strong, for *however* can be a valuable style resource in some prose, e.g. exposition. See also AND/BUT? SIMPLER WORDS ?

can or may (could or might)? Nearly all authorities concede that *can* and *may* are now interchangeable as expressions of permission in speech and informal writing ('*Can/may* he have another chance?'); some, though perhaps not a majority, would allow it in any writing. Similar remarks apply to the past tense forms, *could/might*.
(N.B. The father who corrects his son's '*Can* I?' to '*May* I?' is likely then to say to his wife, 'I told him he *could*, if he asked properly' – and would be hurt if his wife then corrected his *could* to *might*. Usage, not a 'correctness rule', has determined the father's practice as well as the son's.)

can't hardly / couldn't hardly? Use *can hardly/could hardly*.

centre around or on? Logic points to *centre on*, though *centre around* is commonly heard, perhaps because attention is not on the centre but on what is clustered around it.

circumstances, in or under? The old rule which condemned *under the circumstances* has few defenders today. *Under ...* is today as acceptable as *in ...*

comprise? This word is often clumsily used where *have, include, consist, (be) composed of, constitute, form, (be) made up of* would more readily be understood, e.g. 'This cabinet *comprises* (*has*) six compartments'; 'This document is *comprised of* (*made up of*) four reports from specialists'.

continual or continuous? There is a valuable distinction: *continual* means 'going on, but with interspersed breaks'; *continuous* means 'going on without breaks'.
'Writing requires *continual* practice.'
'The ocean currents are in *continuous* motion.'

contractions? See ABBREVIATIONS OR CONTRACTIONS?

criteria? This is the plural form, so only two or more things can be *criteria*; the singular is *criterion*. The word is, anyway, overused and can often be replaced to advantage by *qualities, standards, principles, tests, rules*.

could or might? See CAN OR MAY?

dangling phrases? Most commonly the 'dangler' is an opening phrase, e.g. '*Leaping into the saddle*, the horse galloped off', and it is corrected by supplying the right subject after the phrase. Phrases in other positions, however, can also 'dangle', e.g. 'They saw the Opera House *sailing on the harbour*'. A general vigilance is needed to avoid such 'dangling' lapses into ambiguity, for they are seldom as amusing as these two examples.

different from / to / than? The old rule that *different from* is 'correct' while *different to* is wrong is now regarded as insupportable by most authorities. In Australia, *different to* is the more common usage though *different from* is by no means uncommon; *different than*, which is strongly entrenched in American English, is used much less here, is rarely seen in print, but is probably increasing rapidly in our spoken English.

disinterested or uninterested? The useful distinction between these words is threatened by careless use of the first in places where the second would be appropriate. So do not say *disinterested* if you mean *not interested, lacking in interest, indifferent, apathetic*, or *uninterested*. Save *disinterested* for *impartial, unbiased, unprejudiced* or *detached*.

due to? The old rule that *due to* must not be used as a preposition has been massively bypassed by nearly all English speakers and most writers, including the Queen in her 1957 speech to the Canadian Parliament: 'Due to inability to market their grain, prairie farmers have been forced ...' Modern English has at its disposal a number of phrasal prepositions (e.g. *because of, owing to, as well as, in order to*) and the addition of *due to* is clearly – overdue! We could dispute whether *because of* or *owing to* might have been better choices for the Queen's sentence, but that would be a question of style not usage.

each other or one another? The natural tendency has been to use these phrases interchangeably, but some texts prefer *each other* for two ('The twins glared at *each other*') and *one another* for more than two ('The three women enjoy one another's company').

educationist or educationalist? Both forms are acceptable and the shorter is increasingly favoured.

effect? See AFFECT OR EFFECT ?

USAGE UPDATE

e.g. and i.e.? In ordinary prose *for example* or *for instance* is preferable to the formal looking *e.g.*; and *that is* or *namely* is preferable to *i.e.* But the abbreviations are in order in concentrated expository prose. They do not need to be followed by a comma.

end product/end result? In most uses these are clichés that deserve to be shortened or to be replaced by a more apt word, e.g. *product, result, end, outcome, upshot, consequence.*

enormity? In the often horrific last quarter of the twentieth century, surely we need this word for what used to be its main meanings – 'outrageousness', 'atrociousness', monstrous wickedness'? To use it when we merely mean 'enormousness' or 'bigness' is a trivialisation.

enquiry or inquiry? They are interchangeable words, but *inquiry* seems to be more favoured in Australia, certainly in the sense of 'investigation'; *enquiry* is almost as common when the sense is 'asking'.

everybody/everyone ... they (them, their)? An old 'correctness rule' has held that, because *every* is singular, *everybody* and *everyone* must also be singulars and be followed by singular pronouns, e.g. '*Everybody* was trying *his* hardest'. Today's revulsion against sexist language insists that this should be '... *his or her* hardest' – which is wordy and clumsy. What seems likely is that more and more people will follow the longstanding colloquial usages, *everybody... they, everyone ... they* (e.g. '*Everybody* can't win, can *they*?' '*Everyone* believes *their* own ideas are best'). Many writers and perhaps half the usage authorities already accept this alternative. In such divided conditions, everybody should follow their own preference confidently!

fewer or less? An eighteenth century rule prescribed, 'Use *less* for a quantity, *fewer* for number', e.g. *less* meat, *fewer* eggs. Though *less* had commonly been used for countable items up to that time, the subsequent teaching of the rule served to drive that use of *less* out of edited English. It remained strong, however, in speech and unedited writing (e.g. 'I have two less tickets than I thought I had'). Today, though its editing-out is not uncommon, there is a marked tendency towards more tolerance of *less* as an interchangeable usage with *fewer.*

first or firstly? Use either – there is no rule. An old pedantry held that we should say *first, secondly, thirdly, etc.*, but the common practice in Australia has been *firstly, secondly, etc.* More recently there is a strong appearance of *first, second, etc.*, and even some use of *one, two, etc.*

flammable or inflammable? There is a strong and commendable swing to *flammable.* Though both words mean 'easily set on fire', the prefix *in-* can dangerously cause *inflammable* to be interpreted as 'not easily set on fire'!

foreign words and phrases? Sensibly, the *AGPS Style Manual*[1] says: 'The use of foreign words and phrases is only defensible when there is no exact English equivalent. Unless he is a linguist, the reader will be puzzled by exotic words. Whenever the idea can be adequately expressed in English, use English.'

formal words or plain words? Among the best advice given by H. W. Fowler was his call to avoid formal words that are 'not the plain English for what is meant'. He gave some examples, including: *cease* (stop), *commence* (begin), *complete* (finish), *conceal* (hide), *purchase* (buy), *vessel* (ship), *visualise* (foresee). Emphasising that he did not reject these formal words as words, for they could be appropriate in certain contexts, he declared that the less change there was from plain to formal the better, because few things contribute more to vigour of style than plain words.

former/latter? This is a rather clumsy device; it sounds heavily formal and often obliges the reader to backtrack for the meaning. Some suggestions: (1) avoid *former/latter* if you can; (2) certainly avoid it in spoken English, because backtracking is not possible; (3) prefer to repeat the words (antecedents) to which *former/latter* would refer; (4) when long phrases or sentences rather than single words need to be repeated in expository writing, *former/latter* can be used as a simpler alternative, but consider before doing so whether *first/second* could be even simpler. See also SIMPLER WORDS?

got? Though many respected authorities on usage have urged tolerance of *got*, the word is still frowned on by some teachers. Marckwardt and Walcott (1938) researched the compulsion sense of *got* (e.g. 'You have *got* to do it'), which is the word's most disputed sense, and they cited Ruskin, Disraeli, Dickens, Eliot, Wilde, Shaw, Trollope and others to justify calling such usage 'literary English'. Faced with facts like these the critics usually resort to saying, 'But *got* is an ugly word'. Why not then campaign to bury *but*, which is similar in sound – or *God*? F. T. Wood, in his *Current English Usage*, 1962, says, 'The use or non-use of *got* may well be left to the good taste and linguistic sense of the individual'.

however? See BUT OR HOWEVER?

imply or infer? The useful distinction between these words is often carelessly confused. To *imply* something is to hint it rather than say it outright; to *infer* is to get the hint – or to 'deduce' or 'conclude from' what has been said. In general, a speaker or writer *implies*; a listener or reader *infers.*

in the circumstances? See CIRCUMSTANCES, IN OR UNDER?

inflammable? See FLAMMABLE OR INFLAMMABLE?

inquiry? See ENQUIRY OR INQUIRY?

insofar or in so far? Authorities differ. The main tendency in Australia is towards the single word.

-ise or -ize? There has long been huge confusion over the use of these suffixes. Only a student of classical Greek has a chance of confidently knowing when to use one and not the other. In a bid to rescue us from the mess, the *AGPS Style Manual*[1] urges: 'Spell all words with *-ise, -isation, -ising* (not *-ize*, etc.) when these are suffixes. Note, however, that *-ize* is needed in the following words, in which it is not a suffix: apprize (value), prize, size, seize'.

it? This humble, useful word is perilously easy to use confusingly. 'Never put *it* on paper', warned William Cobbett long ago, 'without thinking what you are about.' In other words, use *it* (or *its*) only when its reference to a preceding subject is perfectly clear; otherwise the reader is condemned to puzzlement or ambiguity.

'it is me' or 'it is I'? This hoary issue has so amiably divided both experts and non-experts for so long that a 'please yourself' consensus now exists. Anyway, it was always a textbookish non-issue. *It is me* was the going currency in informal speech and writing, while neither it nor *it is I* had occasion to occur in formal speech or writing.

its or it's? The simple rule to apply here is: Only use the apostrophe for the contraction of the two words, *it is* and

it has. ('It's time to go.') *Its* is one of a small handful of 'pure' possessives which do not use an apostrophe; they include *his, their, your, our.*

jargon? In early English, *jargon* meant the twittering of birds; hence, today, unintelligible human chatter. The word is usually invoked in criticism of ponderous, pedantic or pretentious language – especially technical or professional language – for which the writer or speaker could well have found a 'plain English' equivalent. A second meaning applies the word non-critically to any 'technical language' used comfortably within a specialist group; such specialists, however, should feel socially obliged to translate or explain their 'jargon' in ordinary language when talking to non-specialists.

latter? See FORMER/LATTER?

like or as? *Like* is accepted as a preposition ('She looks *like* you'), but its use as a conjunction has long been condemned by purists, who would substitute *as* (e.g. in the famous ad, 'Winston tastes good, *like* a cigarette should'). The sphere of action of conjunctive *like* is rapidly increasing in Australian as in American usage and there are strong arguments for tolerating it (see, for example, Margaret Bryant, *Modern English and Its Heritage,* Macmillan NY, 1966 ec.); but the majority of usage authorities seem still to favour *as,* certainly in edited writing.

literally? It means *really, actually* (the opposite of 'metaphorically'), yet neither education nor ridicule has killed its misuse as a simple intensifier (e.g. 'It *literally* rained cats and dogs', 'The Premier has been *literally* caught with his pants down in this dispute'). Teachers can only keep trying.

loan as a verb? For generations our classrooms have taught the simple doctrine, '*Loan* is a noun, *lend* is a verb', while in the playground the reverse has usually prevailed: 'Will you give us a *lend* of your ruler?', 'Can you *loan* us the price of a pie?' There is little support for this colloquial use of *lend* at formal levels, but the case for general acceptance of *loan* as a verb as well as a noun is strong.

lot/lots (of)/a lot (of)? The trend to a less formal style in writing is bringing these into greater use. Less tolerant times would have insisted on substituting, say, *a great deal, a good deal, a large quantity* (or *number*), *many*, or *much.* Many modern writers do not hesitate to use *lot(s).* N.B. *A lot* cannot be spelt as one word.

may? See CAN OR MAY (COULD OR MIGHT)?

media? Oversimplified is the commonly heard rule: *medium* is singular, *media* plural. *Mediums* is often a legitimate alternative plural and its use seems to be increasing as speakers and writers feel a need to distinguish their means/instruments/agencies/ etc. from *media* in the pervasive sense of 'mass communications media'. (*Media* as a singular and *medias* as a plural are still generally condemned.)

myself or me? *Myself* seems to be as much used as *me* in sentences like, 'The prize will be split between the President and *myself* (me)'. Some usage authorities approve it as 'modest, polite, and courteous' (Pooley) but a larger number feel that it is 'a prissy evasion of me' (Highet).

nice? Though vilified by generations of teachers, *nice* remains firmly entrenched in conversational English. There is usually a good case for thinking of a more exact word when we are writing, for *nice* comes too readily to mind as an all-purpose adjective for *pretty, attractive, pleasant, friendly, warm, harmonious* – and, indeed, hundreds of other meanings. On the other hand, *nice* deserves to be used more for its precise meanings – subtle, sensitive, deft, discriminative, etc. – which take up most of the space given to it in dictionaries.

none ... is or none... are? An old rule claims *none* as a singular only; but most usage authorities now recognise also the plural form. ('Though some of these economic policies found their way into Labor Party platforms, none of them were acted upon ...')

one ... one or one ... he? Should we write, '*One* ought to state *one's* beliefs ...' or '*One* ought to state *his* beliefs ...'? The first form has long been taught as correct in British and Australian schools and the second in American schools. Neither is 'correct' in an absolute sense, and probably both are better avoided in the interests of elegance. But if one form is needed there is a recent reason for staying with the relatively impersonal British-Australian form: to say 'one... he' is sexist and therefore needs the cumbersome 'one ... he or she'.

one another? See EACH OTHER OR ONE ANOTHER?

passive? See ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?

per se? This Latinism appears more and more frequently, just when most others are being discarded for English equivalents. It means *as such.* So why not say *as such*?
See also FOREIGN WORDS AND PHRASES?

place names? A simplifying tendency drops the apostrophe from place names, as in *Coopers Creek, Spencer Gulf.*

prepositions at end? Despite an ancient dogma that they shouldn't, reputable writers past and present do end sentences with prepositions. Not always, of course. The preposition can sound clumsy at the end, and then another construction should be used, e.g. 'That is the song he is the composer *of*' ('That is the song he composed'). But it can sound perfectly natural, e.g. 'She makes a good job of anything she is interested *in*'. Fowler says that those who condemn the final preposition as 'inelegant' are 'unconsciously trying to deprive the English language of a valuable idiomatic resource, which has been used freely by all our greatest writers except those whose instinct for English idiom has been overpowered by notions of correctness derived from Latin standards'.

possessives? See APOSTROPHES?

recurrence? Though *reoccurence* is common in Australian colloquial speech, *recurrence* prevails in careful speech and edited writing.

reason ... is because This usage is common and seems to be increasing, but it contains an element of redundancy which is easily avoided: (1) by preferring *reason ... is that*; or (2) by dropping *the reason ... is.* Compare 'The *reason* he walks *is because* it is healthier' with:
(1) 'The reason he walks is that it is healthier.'
(2) 'He walks because it is healthier.'

redundancy? A writer who uses needlessly repetitious words is guilty of *redundancy* (or *pleonasm*). A similar term is *tautology,* though it is more often applied to clear instances of saying something twice (ascend *up, two* twins, crowded *full,* problems *and difficulties*). For more general wordiness there are also the terms *verbosity* and *prolixity,* which tend now to be applied to speech rather than writing – talking for talking's sake, whether it is endless chatter or a pompous flow.

repetition of words? Mark Twain once said: 'I do not find that the repetition of an important word a few times – say three or four times – in a paragraph troubles my ear if clearness of meaning is best secured thereby. But tautological repetition which has no justifying object ... that is another matter.' A classical example of effective uses of repetition is Francis Bacon's essay 'Of Studies'.
See also REDUNDANCY.

round? See AROUND OR ROUND?

run-on sentences? A 'run-on', 'fused', or 'run-together' sentence is a construction in which two or more sentences are not separated by a full-stop (or semicolon) or joined by a conjunction. For example, 'The traffic was thick in the city near the Cenotaph we were unable to find parking'. (The writer's failure to insert a full-stop leaves the reader wondering whether it should go before or after *near the Cenotaph*.) A similar fault is the 'comma-splice': two sentences, instead of being separated by a full-stop or semicolon, are wrongly joined by a comma. For example, 'He knocked politely, when the door opened he was confronted by an angry man.'

shall or will (should or would)? The old and complex rules which tried to distinguish sharply between the uses of these words were never widely understood. (In Australia a grossly oversimplified version of the rules was taught for generations, often with missionary zeal: that *shall* is used in the first person, as *I* or *we shall*; and *will* in the second and third person, as *he, she, it, you, they will;* and that the reverse expresses determination.) In 1940 the linguist C. C. Fries summed up his historical study of *shall/will* usage: '... after more than a century of discussion of the use of *shall* and *will*, there are no accepted views of what the actual usage of these two words is ...' In Australia today, as elsewhere, the strong tendency is to favour *will*. The main speech forms have always been the contractions *I'll, we'll they'll*, etc. which are generally supposed to represent *will* rather than *shall*. The swing to *will* in writing is in keeping with the dominant modern tendency of prose style towards plain, speech-based prose. Does all this mean that *shall* could disappear? No. There is a tendency to retain *shall* in first person questions ('*Shall* we go now?'), in some imperatives ('You shall!') and, despite the classroom rule, in first person expressions of determination ('We *shall* fight on the beaches ...', as Churchill said). (NOTE ON should/would: *Should* is now chiefly used for *ought to*; otherwise, it appears in the first person where it is interchangeable with the much more favoured *would*.)

simpler words? We are tempted into the use of long or formal or pompous words chiefly when we write, for then we are not stimulated by a physical presence to keep to speech-simple words. Below is a list of such words, together with simpler equivalents. The list is deliberately brief because it only wishes to make the point that we should always try for a simpler word. (N.B. In some contexts the listed words could be quite appropriate, e.g. *show* is usually preferable to *demonstrate* but it cannot cover all of the uses of *demonstrate*.)

approximately *(about)*	feasible *(possible)*
communicate *(tell, inform)*	implement *(carry out)*
detrimental *(harmful)*	inaugurate *(start, begin)*
eminently *(highly)*	initially *(first, at first)*
endeavour *(try)*	institute *(start, set up)*
envisage *(foresee)*	obtain *(get)*
eventuate *(happen, result)*	obviate *(avoid, prevent)*
facilitate *(help)*	operative *(key, essential)*
predominantly *(chiefly, mainly)*	utilise *(use)*
substantial *(big, large)*	virtually *(almost)*

sound (of writing)? 'Does it sound right?' This simple question provides the best single method of testing writing. So consult your 'mind's ear' on whether your sentence is smooth. Be dissatisfied if, even in formal levels of writing, what you 'hear' seems awkward or remote from the vocabulary and rhythms of good conversation. And if you are in doubt, go a step further and read the sentence or passage aloud. This is an old principle. Nearly 2000 years ago the Roman critic Aulus Gellius put it this way: 'If you are either composing verse or writing prose . . . pay no attention to the musty, fusty rules of the grammarians, but consult your own ear as to what is to be said in any given place. What it favours will surely be the best.'

split infinitive? In the so-called split infinitive, an adverb occurs between *to* and the infinitive form of the verb, e.g. 'His aim is *to* continually *interrupt* the speaker.' Rigid opposition to any such 'splitting' is still heard, but this ignores several historical facts: (1) infinitives were unselfconsciously 'split' for at least 500 years until early in the nineteenth century when a don't-split rule suddenly became fashionable; (2) this rule arose from regard for Latin, whose infinitive is a single unsplittable word, not English, and it has been fundamentally challenged by several grammarians of English who have argued against regarding *to* as part of the infinitive; (3) nearly all twentieth century authorities have at least gone along with Fowler in saying, '. . . it is better to split one's infinitives than to be ambiguous or artificial'. The whole issue can be treated as one of style not grammar: in most cases *to* is best left beside the infinitive; but there should be no hesitation in writing a split infinitive where it *sounds* natural (e.g. 'An hour's practice a day is good, but *to* really *master* the instrument calls for a great deal more'); and no hesitation whatsoever where splitting means avoidance of ambiguity.

that or which? This is a continual problem for a writer: 'The taps *which/that* are dripping need attention.' There is no generally accepted rule to guide our choice of one word or the other, though some people mistakenly believe that *which* is either 'correct' or more elegant and so should be used everywhere. In fact, the strong tendency in modern writing is to favour *that*, probably because it follows what is common in speech-usage. We can, therefore, 'play it by ear': (1) generally preferring *that* to *which*; (2) not using either if the sentence can possibly dispense with a relative pronoun; (3) recognising that *which* is usually preferable in the special case of non-restrictive clauses (i.e. as in 'China, which used to be called Cathay, has an ancient culture': the relative clause is set off with commas, as if in parenthesis, and so does not restrict the meaning of 'China').

till or until? *Till* and *until* are generally interchangeable. Both are acceptable at all levels of usage, though the traditional practice of the schools in deprecating all forms of abbreviations may account for a belief held by some people that *till* is less respectable.

too? Until recently a convention set this word off with commas in sentences like, 'The policemen, *too*, were frightened by the confrontation'. Now the tendency is to omit the commas, provided no confusion results.

try and or try to? For some time purists have insisted on *try to* and have rejected *try and* as less direct or simply illogical. But *try and* has long been a widely used idiom

('Try and stop it!') and has been used by some leading writers. Several recent usage panels have shown a growing tolerance for *try and*, accepting it in speech and informal writing, but they continue to regard it as unacceptable in formal writing.

uninterested? See DISINTERESTED OR UNINTERESTED

until? See TILL/UNTIL

upon or on? These words mean the same and are equally acceptable at all levels of usage. *On* is much more common. An American advocate of the closest possible approximation of writing to speech declares: '*Upon* doesn't mean anything different from *on*, and should be shortened to *on*' (Rudolf Flesch, *The ABC of Style*). But most commentators leave the matter to personal choice. Even if *upon* is a little more formal, there are times when it suits the rhythm or emphasis of our prose.

usage or use? These two words have some overlapping senses, but *use* is preferable when the sense is simply that of *using* or *usefulness; usage* is then saved for the specialised sense of a *manner of using, customary or habitual practice.* (The analogy with *wastage/waste* can help us to discriminate.)

use or utilise? Prefer *use* wherever possible – and it is nearly always possible. *Utilise* becomes apt in the special senses of making productive or profitable what was previously not used or not fully used, e.g. 'That by-product, hitherto sold cheap in a crude form, will be better *utilised* if we install this new process.'

verbless sentences? The sentence, by the best-known of its many definitions, is a group of words containing a verb. But to insist on that is to rule out the verbless sentence, as purists once tried to do. Today, this sentence is accepted as a legitimate style device, and many good writers use it. Unfortunately inexperienced writers often use it badly. What is worse, verbless sentences are sometimes written unconsciously and quite wrongly.
(1) *Examples of Wrong Use* (usually corrected by a comma to link the two parts): *Rather intrigued by his success.* We made enquiries./ Jones was promoted to manager. *A position that he relished.* /He had not shown up well in the past. *Being inclined to laziness.* /In due course he got into trouble with the Board. *For several misdemeanours, especially overstating production.* /The charges were made by Jackson. *Who is the director in charge of quality control.*
(2) *Examples of Effective Use:* Does this mean he should resign? *Not really.* /He could have been as efficient as Ellis. *Well, almost.* / Hitler's 'solution' to the 'Jewish problem' was extermination. *A reversion to barbarism.* / In this way France has solved its main economic problem. *Which is more than can be said of Italy.* (This last example shows a subordinate clause given sentence status.) Verbless sentences usually have a strongly implied ('understood') verbal element.

whether or not/whether or no? In some uses, these are entrenched idioms; but in writing they can often give way to simple *whether.* See also AS TO

while/whilst? Though *whilst* is sometimed called archaic, and is much less used than *while*, it is not uncommon in Australian writing, particularly in front of some words beginning with vowels, e.g. *whilst* others, *whilst* ignoring. See also AMONG OR AMONGST?

who/whom? An old rule asserts, *who* is used of subjects and *whom* of objects. But to apply this rule universally offends against certain longstanding usages. For instance, *who* has been the natural English form since at least the fifteenth century for opening a question, but exponents of the rule have insisted that *whom* should replace *who* in questions like '*Who* did you see?' or '*Who* did you speak to?' A second instance: many distinguished writers (e.g. Churchill, Forster, Maugham) write sentences with structures like these –
'The Prince, *whom* they thought was away, arrived first'
'They located the peddlers *whom* the chief said were bandits'
'There can be no doubt as to *whom* should be invited'
'We can't recall *whom* it was that she had mentioned'
but exponents of the rule want *who* in all of them. Do you, Reader, have enough grammar to work out why they do? If not, you will easily see that that rule is a source of endless confusion, because its consistent application demands a much deeper knowledge of grammar than even most professional writers possess. Moreover, language authorities themselves are divided about applications of the 'rule' (e.g. Gowers would want *who* in the four sentences while Jespersen would defend *whom* as 'natural' and 'idiomatic', and in that sense acceptable. What a pity those eighteenth century grammarians, drilled in Latin but knowing little about English, took it upon themselves to insist that we should all observe this rule-bound *who/whom* difference. Left to usage these words would probably have become as interchangeable as *on/upon* Then we could have followed guiltlessly what is almost always the best principle for English word-choice and word-order: use whatever sounds best. As a matter of fact, many writers are doing so today with *who/whom* – and nearly all speakers. Shakespeare, of course, never did otherwise.

will or shall? See SHALL OR WILL?

would or should? See SHALL OR WILL?

Notes (1) AGPS Style Manual : *This is the* Style Manual; for Authors, Editors and Printers of Australian Government Publications, *published by the Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra (3rd. ed., 1978) . . . (2) 'Usage Update' is a 1979 revision of items researched by the author in the early seventies for the 'Guide to Usage and Style' which he contributed to* Good Australian English, *edited by G. W. Turner (Reed 1972), pp. 240 – 310. For more items and longer explanations, that book may be referred to . . . (3) The notions of usage abroad in the Australian community have come mainly from old classroom correctness prescriptions and from H. W. Fowler's* Modern English Usage, *which has enjoyed scriptural authority in educational circles for half a century. Neither Fowler nor other compilers of popular usage texts worked from statistical surveys of actual usage. He, for instance, based his views on data collected rather haphazardly for the* Oxford English Dictionary. *– certainly not a usage survey. Moreover he often disagreed with the data and then simply expressed his own opinions. His great contemporary, Jespersen, termed him 'an instinctive grammatical moraliser'. Some of his views still stand and are reflected in this 'Update'; others have been left behind by either usage itself or recent scholarly studies of usage, grammar and rhetoric. – RDW.*

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